



The University of
Nottingham

Empty Properties Survey 2008

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Foreword

This report is based on a postal survey of owners of empty properties across ten local authority areas in the East Midlands. The report comprises:

- A summary of the key research findings
- A summary of the policy and practitioner recommendations resulting from the research
- A detailed analysis and presentation of the survey findings

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the ten local authorities who participated in this research and provided details of empty properties in their area. Our thanks also go to the property owners / managers who completed the questionnaire.

Executive Summary

i) Research findings

Context:

- R1. A postal questionnaire was sent to 5095 owners of unoccupied residential properties across ten East Midlands local authority areas. A total of 494 completed questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 11% (Section 1.4)
- R2. It is difficult to generalise reliably about the motivations of those who choose not to respond to a survey, but it is unwise to assume that the characteristics of non-responders are similar to those of responders. In the case of this survey, it is reasonable to presume two substantial elements within the body of non-responders. First, there are owners whose properties were not in fact unoccupied but who did not, for whatever reason, manage to complete and return the covering letter to explain they were outside the scope of the survey. Secondly, those who are most comfortable with being the owners of an empty property and least proactive in bringing their property back into occupation are especially likely to be out of sympathy with the aims of the survey and are least likely to respond. Putting it another way, it is likely that there was a differentially high response from those who are more proactive and are more concerned about leaving properties empty. The findings presented throughout this report should therefore be interpreted with this in mind.

Type of property:

- R3. Respondents were owners of or responsible for a variety of property types, though they were most likely to own a terraced or semi detached house and the majority of dwellings had either two or three bedrooms (Section 2.1)
- R4. Fifty-eight percent of respondents owned properties that were built before 1940 and predictably, the older properties were more likely to require major renovation work (Section 2.1)
- R5. Almost two-thirds of owners who provided the postcode of their property owned a dwelling in an urban area, while 22% were in rural areas (Section 2.1)

R6. Almost a third of respondents had purchased the property with the intention of occupying it themselves and 26% had bought it as an investment (Section 2.2)

Plans for the property

R7. When asked what their plans were for the property in one year's time, 38% said it would be sold or for sale on the open market and 21% thought it would be let to tenants (Section 2.3)

R8. Thirteen percent of respondents anticipated that their property would still be empty in one year's time, and when asked why this would be the case, just two respondents indicated that they were purposefully leaving it empty – suggesting that among survey respondents at least, the phenomenon of 'buy to leave' properties is not widespread (Section 2.3)

R9. Those who purchased the property as an investment or for family or friends to live in were the least likely to state that the property would still be empty in 12 months, while those who either bought it to live in or inherited it were the most likely to say the property would still be empty in a year (Section 2.3)

R10. Almost half of respondents anticipated the property would remain empty for less than six months and just 2% thought this would be the case for more than two years (Section 2.3)

R11. Forty-two percent of respondents indicated that their property was currently being marketed for sale or to let, and 63% said it was currently being improved or repaired (Section 2.3)

R12. Ongoing renovations and improvements to the property and the associated costs were the most frequently cited reasons for properties currently standing empty. Though only two respondents specifically stated that the property would remain purposefully empty in one year's time (see point R8), one in ten stated that at present they do not want their property occupied (Section 2.3)

R13. A substantial number of respondents expressed frustration at current housing market conditions which have left many properties on the market for sale for longer than expected (Section 2.3)

Concerns about the property and the surrounding area

- R14. Just over half of respondents were 'very' or 'fairly' concerned about vandalism as a result of their property being empty and 19% were 'very concerned' about a decrease in their property's value, though it is unclear whether this is due to the property being empty or current housing market conditions more generally (Section 2.4)
- R15. In terms of the impact empty properties can have on the local neighbourhood, respondents were most likely to express concern over the possibility of empty dwellings attracting socially undesirable groups to the area. Almost three-quarters were not concerned about empty properties contributing to a housing shortage in the area (Section 2.4)

Usage and likely usage of council services

- R16. Of a list of possible services and support the local council might offer owners of empty properties, respondents were most likely to make use of grants for improvements or repairs (5% had already used these and a further 44% said they were 'very' or 'fairly' likely to use them) (Section 3.1)
- R17. Almost one-third of respondents were keen for local councils to assist by providing lists of professionals and trades people to work on renovating and improving the properties and 21% wanted the council to offer advice on organising improvements and repairs (Section 3.1)
- R18. Respondents were least likely to make use of the private sector leasing scheme (80% said they were unlikely to take up this support) (Section 3.1)
- R19. In an aggregated 'score' of openness to assistance from their local council, 64% of owners who do not want their property occupied at present were not at all open to council assistance compared to 40% of respondents overall (Section 3.1)

The role of the local council in bringing properties back into occupation

- R20. When asked to indicate how far they agree with a series of statements about the role of the local council, perhaps predictably the majority of owners agreed that 'property owners should be free to leave their property empty if they wish to', though more than half agreed that 'local councils have a duty to reduce the number of empty properties in their area' (Section 3.2)

- R21. Property owners were less supportive of the enforcement powers of councils in bringing properties back into occupation; 31% strongly disagreed that councils should use measures such as compulsory purchase and compulsory leasing and 57% strongly disagreed that 'councils are right to charge full council tax for empty properties' (Section 3.2)
- R22. Respondents' open-ended comments revealed that a major objection to the charging of full council tax is the perception that council services are not used where a property is unoccupied, though some acknowledged that a reduced level of council tax may be fairer since properties still benefit from services such as street lighting and policing (Section 3.2)
- R23. Several respondents commented that charging council tax diverted funds away from property renovations and hence increased the length of time over which a property remains unoccupied and others argued that council tax should not be payable where a property is being actively marketed for sale or to let (Section 3.2)
- R24. Planning permission procedures were criticised by several respondents in response to some of the open-ended questions, in particular there were calls for a simplification and streamlining of the process to avoid delays in getting properties occupied again (Section 3.2 and 3.3)

Contact with the local council

- R25. Just under two-thirds of respondents had contacted their local council with reference to their empty property and mixed views were expressed as to the extent to which the council had offered the support expected, and had appreciated their position as an owner of an unoccupied dwelling (Section 3.3)
- R26. Those who had not made contact with their council about the property were most likely to say that this was because they do not need assistance (54%), however, 29% stated that this was because they were unaware that the council could offer any help (Section 3.3)

Suggested improvements to council support for empty property owners

- R27. When asked what more the council could do to assist empty property owners, a substantial proportion of respondents requested changes to the availability of grants for improvement work; specifically making grants easier to apply for and

making larger grants available were requested by 29% and 25% of respondents respectively (Section 3.4)

R28. In response to the invitation to suggest improvements to the support provided by local councils, the most frequently made suggestions were to raise awareness of the help available, to broaden the eligibility criteria for improvement grants and to treat each case individually rather than impose 'blanket' policies on property owners without accounting for individual circumstances (Section 3.4)

ii) Policy and practitioner recommendations (EMEPPF)

Regional policy recommendations

RP1. To recognise that bringing empty properties into use can contribute to both an increase in general housing supply and affordable housing provision.

RP2. Thirty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they planned to sell the empty property. Supporting the purchase of empty properties by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to increase the supply of affordable housing. This will address owners' wishes to sell and with the slowing down of the housing market it may be an optimum time for RSLs to acquire property. Some dwellings may need substantial renovation and others may require very little, if any at all. This would directly contribute to NI 155 – number of net additional affordable homes provided. (Section 2.3)

Empty properties purchased by RSLs can be put to a variety of uses including increasing the supply of general needs housing, increasing the amount of temporary accommodation for homeless households, thus reducing the need for bed and breakfast and move-on accommodation for those leaving supported schemes. (Reported by EMEPPF)

Where RSLs do not have the capacity to implement such 'Purchase' schemes this could be opened up to accredited private landlords who sign a legal agreement to let the property at local authority defined affordable rents (for X years or in perpetuity), or sell at below market value (the proportion to be defined by the local authority), again addressing owners' wishes to sell and increasing the amount of affordable housing. (Put forward by EMEPPF)

- RP3. Sixty-three percent of respondents stated the property was undergoing improvements or repairs and 32% stated these factors preventing the property being occupied. Incorporation of empty homes into the Decent Homes grant programme for private sector stock could be used to address the financial barriers owners experience. This will address issues of disrepair and the proportion of non-decent stock. A flexible eligibility criterion will increase the number of owners that could be helped and the number of properties made decent. (Section 2.3)
- RP4. To introduce innovation pots aimed at assisting local authorities to take action for either voluntary or enforcement schemes, including where local authorities have identified a local priority that is not recognised within the Regional Housing Strategy. This will enable individual local authorities to best respond to empty property owners in their areas with the creation of suitable voluntary initiatives. The indication in the survey that owners who do not want their properties occupied for the meantime are also the least receptive to local authority help may conflict with an authority's priority of returning empty properties to use. In some instances there may be a genuine reason but enforcement may be required for those who are unable or unwilling to return the property to occupation themselves.

Local authorities have perceived financial and capacity barriers to undertaking enforcement action, such as, compulsory purchase and empty dwelling management orders. A pot to support enforcement could help to improve private sector housing standards and the supply of affordable housing. If the property is not disposed of to an RSL then capital received from the sale of the property could be recycled back to the funding pot, if required. (Reported by EMEPF)

Innovation pots to help local councils provide interest free loans to owners rather than perpetuate a 'grant culture', particularly as the survey indicates the majority of owners purposely acquired the property. When loans are repaid they can be recycled into the local authority's funding pot. This would also address owners' issues regarding repair costs being a barrier to returning the property to use quickly. (Section 2.2)

Local practitioner recommendations

- LP1. There is a need to have up to date information about the location of empty properties and owners' details. It is clear from the response rate and reasons for not responding that accurate data are required. Regular updates from Council Tax are a good start but there are some dwellings that are so dilapidated they are not

on the Council Tax system and some new-build is empty for a number of years because owners delay the final building control inspection, which would certify the structures to be dwellings suitable for occupation. This could well be applicable to new-build city centre flats. (Section 1.4)

- LP2. Repair costs were cited as a barrier to occupation and owners felt councils could be of assistance by offering financial help. Authorities could look at creative grant or loan solutions, keeping the eligibility criterion as wide as possible to accommodate as many empty properties as possible. (Sections 2.2, 2.3, 3.1 and 3.4)
- LP3. Owners frequently wanted to sell the property so assistance in this area could meet some of their needs. For example, helping to find buyers and bringing partners on board to facilitate purchase and repair schemes. There would also be the opportunity to increase the number of affordable dwellings. Owners may also require forthright advice about the housing market conditions and the effect on price as well as ways to attract buyers. (Section 2.2 and 3.1)
- LP4. Council Tax was obviously a contentious issue for owners and Empty Property Officers will have to balance national pressure to remove empty property discounts and address owners' comments that paying full council tax diverts funds away from refurbishment. In some instances though, the council's policy will have already been decided upon and Empty Property Officers will not have an input into whether or not discounts are removed. Owners' comments about the unfairness of paying council tax and not receiving services could be addressed by Empty Property Officers having knowledge of exactly what council tax provides and whether there is an increased cost to councils and the community as a result of property being empty. (Section 3.2)
- LP5. Unprompted by any survey questions, owners also criticised planning services. In relevant instances, Empty Property Officers and Planning Officers could work together to ensure they are not asking contradictory things of owners. For example, an owner would not want to feel pressurised to return a property into use if it requires careful discussions with Planners and is temporarily tied to the timescales imposed by the planning process. (Section 3.4)
- LP6. Owners appeared to want information about what help could be provided early on. This suggests Empty Property Officers should have a proactive role in promoting what is available. (Section 3.4)

- LP7. Owners' responses about wanting to know of local trades people and service providers that can help suggest Empty Property Officers could have directories of public and private organisations and the way they can help. For example, help with regard to carrying out building/electrical/gas/roofing/carpentry, glazing etc., surveyors, legal services, financial services, letting/sales agents, auctioneers, structural engineers, architects, project managers and others involved in processes of returning empty properties to use. Owners feel they would also benefit by Empty Property Officers being a central point of contact within the Council for any issues they may have regarding their empty property. This could be used in conjunction with point 6 above. (Section 3.4)
- LP8. Another concern of owners is not feeling like an 'individual'. Empty Property Officers will have to balance corporate priorities and policies against the circumstances of the individual but of course there will be times when organisational demands take precedent. (Section 3.4)
- LP9. Retain the number of empty properties brought into use as a local indicator now that it has been removed from the new National Indicators. (Put forward by EMEPF)
- LP10. Recommend that empty properties returned to use be included within the Housing and Planning Delivery Grant. (Put forward by EMEPF)
- LP11. Where funding for affordable housing is secured from a Section 106 agreement, recommend that a proportion of this is set aside for empty property work. (Put forward by EMEPF)

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1: Introduction

1.1: Study background

This research has been commissioned by local councils across the East Midlands via the East Midlands Empty Property Forum (EMEPPF). It has been jointly funded by English Partnerships, the National Regeneration Agency and the Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF). The University of Nottingham's Survey Unit were appointed to conduct and analyse the survey.

1.2: Aims

The main aims of the research were to establish what might be preventing owners from bringing their properties back into occupation, to evaluate existing local council measures aimed at bringing properties back into use and to assess which additional services or support may be effective. It is also intended that the research findings will help to inform both the East Midlands Regional Housing Strategy, and individual local councils' empty properties strategies.

1.3: Research design

A self-completion questionnaire was designed in consultation with representatives of the EMEPPF and the BSHF (Appendix 1). The questionnaire gathered information on respondents' usage and opinions of the various local council services, schemes and responsibilities with regard to empty properties. It also collected some contextual information about the characteristics of the empty property, how the respondent came to be responsible for it and what their plans were for the property.

Lists of properties which had been empty for six months or more and contact details for their owners were drawn up by each of the ten participating local authorities and passed to the Survey Unit. Duplicates were removed (where one owner was responsible for more than one property in any local authority area) as were any records with overseas postal addresses (because the Freepost return system is not valid from overseas).

Empty property owners were sent a questionnaire (including a Freepost return envelope) and a covering letter explaining the purposes of the survey on 7th March 2008. The covering letter specified the address of the empty property and requested that they complete the survey with reference to this property. Recipients were asked to return

either their completed questionnaire, or the covering letter indicating that the property is no longer empty or that they are not responsible for that property, by 26th March. A web version of the survey was also offered for those who preferred to submit their responses online, details of which were provided in the covering letter. As an additional incentive to participate, those who returned a completed questionnaire were offered the opportunity to enter a prize draw for one of two prizes of £200 in High Street Vouchers.

A reminder letter and a further copy of the questionnaire were sent on 28th March to all respondents who had not opted out and the deadline for return was extended to 8th April 2008. All returns received up to and including 18th April 2008 were included in the analyses.

The survey proved somewhat contentious for some recipients and prompted a number of property owners to contact the Survey Unit and/or their local council to complain. The main area of concern surrounded Data Protection issues and many felt that their council had not operated within the remit of the Data Protection Act by passing their details to the Survey Unit. In most cases, complainants were appeased by reassurances about the handling of their data and the security measures adopted by the Survey Unit and an explanation that the Survey Unit had been appointed to conduct the research on behalf of the local authorities and that a data sharing protocol was in place to ensure correct handling of any data.

This report presents the findings of the survey. Responses are presented in tabular and graphical form and percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number throughout. Where open-ended questions were asked requiring textual responses the main themes of responses are summarised and where appropriate illustrative quotes are provided. For brevity respondents are referred to as 'owners' of empty properties throughout the report, though it is acknowledged that some may be responsible for the property but not necessarily the owner.

1.4: Response rate

A total of 5095 questionnaires were dispatched to owners of empty properties. The covering letter asked recipients for whom the questionnaire was not applicable to tick the appropriate box (to indicate that the property is either no longer empty or that they are not responsible for the property) and return the letter to the Survey Unit so that a reminder would not be issued. As Figure 1.4.1 reports, a total of 494 completed surveys were returned (7 of which were completed online) and once those that were returned to

sender and those who notified the Survey Unit that they would not be participating are accounted for this gives an overall response rate of 11%. This is considered a reasonable response rate given the nature of the survey and the distribution method. Specifically, the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the objections to the sharing of their personal details mentioned above may have deterred some property owners from responding.

The total 'non-participation' figure of 557 comprises 521 recipients who opted-out by returning the covering letter because the survey did not apply to them, and a further 36 who contacted the Survey Unit individually with a variety of reasons for not participating, the most prevalent reason related to objections to the sharing of their personal details. The number of recipients who replied saying that they are unable to participate is relatively high, particularly in proportion to the number of completed surveys returned. It is not clear exactly why this is the case, but it should be noted that the lists drawn from council tax records are only a 'snapshot' at any given time and the situation can change (even during the survey administration period), it is also possible that property owners themselves have not updated or were slow to inform the council of any changes, thus rendering the survey inapplicable to them. There may have been differences in the way different local authorities processed their lists of potential respondents (for example, there was evidence that some authorities had included executors while others had not) and some groups may be more likely to respond than others. It is impossible to say why those who did not take part chose not to, but it is important to remember that non-respondents are likely to comprise two main groups: those who chose not to respond and those for whom the survey was inapplicable.

Figure 1.4.1: Response rate

| Number of questionnaires distributed | Number returned to sender | Number of notifications of non-participation | Number of completed questionnaires | Response rate |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|--|------------------------------------|---------------|
| 5095 | 239 | 557 | 494 | 11% |

The questionnaires identified in which local authority area the empty property was situated; Figure 1.4.2 shows the number and percentage of responses according to local authority area. The response rates were particularly low within the two city councils involved in the research therefore urban areas are likely to be under-represented in the data.

Figure 1.4.2: Responses by local authority

| Local authority | Number of questionnaires distributed | Number returned to sender | Number of notifications of non-participation * | Number of completed questionnaires | Response rate |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|--|------------------------------------|---------------|
| Ashfield | 903 | 48 | 106 | 94 | 13% |
| Amber Valley | 807 | 14 | 72 | 115 | 16% |
| Derby City | 944 | 47 | 77 | 54 | 7% |
| Derbyshire Dales | 439 | 10 | 75 | 47 | 13% |
| Daventry | 31 | 5 | 7 | 2 | 11% |
| High Peak | 289 | 1 | 30 | 31 | 12% |
| Mansfield | 377 | 25 | 64 | 28 | 10% |
| Nottingham City | 542 | 64 | 31 | 27 | 6% |
| North Kesteven | 513 | 21 | 39 | 80 | 18% |
| South Derbyshire | 250 | 4 | 46 | 16 | 8% |

*NB Non-participants column does not total 557 as in Figure 1.4.1 because 10 respondents refused to participate but did not identify which local authority area their property was in.

2: About the property

The first section of the questionnaire asked a series of questions about the nature of the property such as the type of dwelling, its age, the number of bedrooms and its general condition. These questions were intended to elicit some contextual information and give a picture of the range and variety of property types currently unoccupied.

2.1: Type of property

Figure 2.1.1 shows that 27% of respondents said that their unoccupied property was a terraced house. Flats were owned by the smallest proportion of respondents (10%), and among these, just over one-third were flats within purpose-built blocks and the remainder were other types of flats such as converted houses or flats above business premises (Figure 2.1.2). Those who owned flats were also asked to state how many floors the whole block has; around half had one or two floors, a reflection of the relatively high proportion which are not in purpose-built blocks (Figure 2.1.3).

Figure 2.1.1: Type of property (Q1.2a)

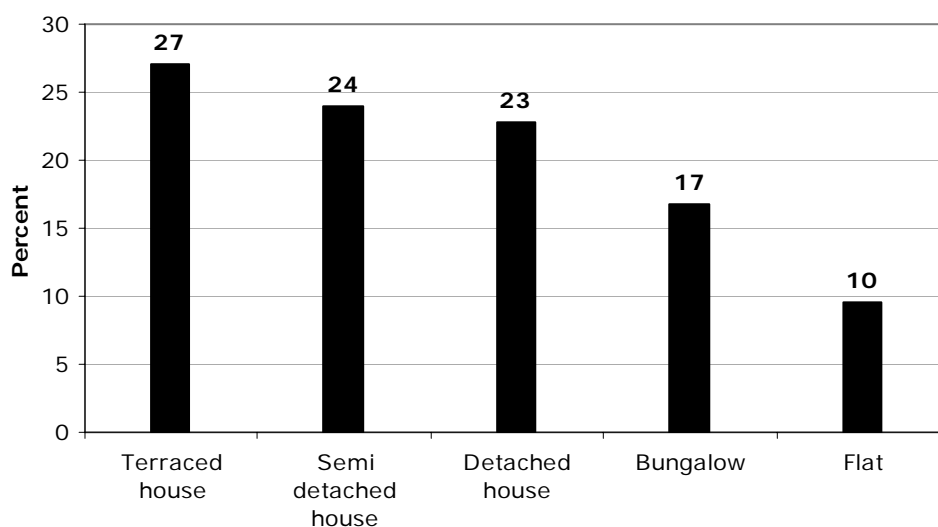


Figure 2.1.2: Type of flat (Q1.2a)

| | n | % |
|--|----|-----|
| In a purpose-built block in the city centre | 8 | 18 |
| In a purpose-built block outside the city centre | 9 | 20 |
| Other type of flat | 27 | 61 |
| Total | 44 | 100 |

Figure 2.1.3: Number of floors in building – Flats only (Q1.2e)

| | n | % |
|-------|----|-----|
| One | 7 | 16 |
| Two | 16 | 36 |
| Three | 11 | 25 |
| Four | 8 | 18 |
| Seven | 1 | 2 |
| Ten | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 44 | 100 |

The majority of dwellings had either two or three bedrooms (Figure 2.1.4).

Figure 2.1.4: Number of bedrooms (Q1.2d)

| | n | % |
|-------|-----|-----|
| None | 1 | 0 |
| One | 37 | 8 |
| Two | 173 | 37 |
| Three | 181 | 38 |
| Four | 58 | 12 |
| Five | 14 | 3 |
| Six | 1 | 0 |
| Seven | 4 | 1 |
| Eight | 1 | 0 |
| Ten | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 471 | 100 |

More than half (58%) of properties owned by respondents were built before 1940 (Figure 2.1.5), and 59% were in need of redecoration or major improvement works (Figure 2.1.6). Perhaps unsurprisingly, when age and condition are viewed together in Figure 2.1.7, it is evident that older properties are more likely to be in need of renovation, for example, 59% of pre-1914 properties were judged by their owner to require major improvement work.

Figure 2.1.5: Approximate age of property (Q1.2b)

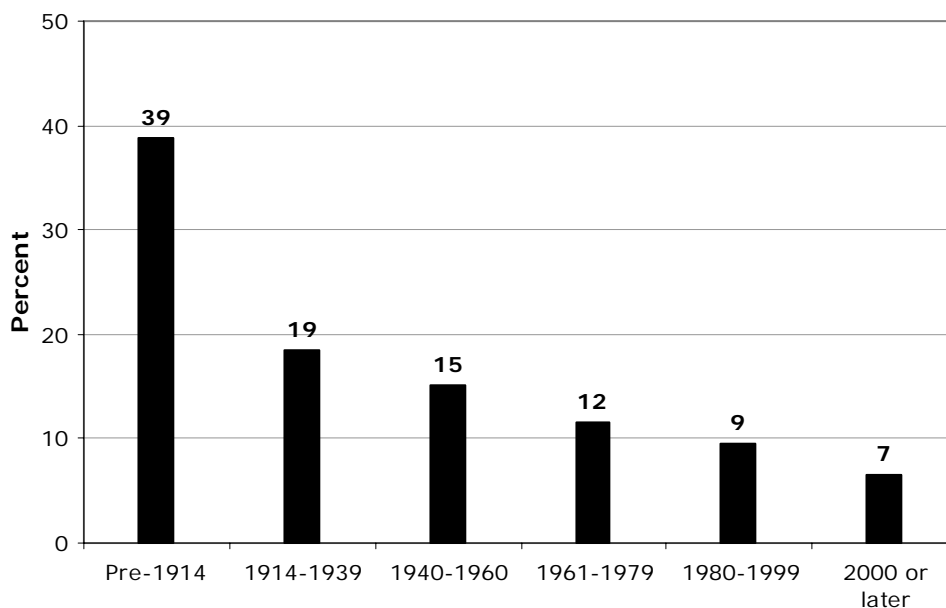
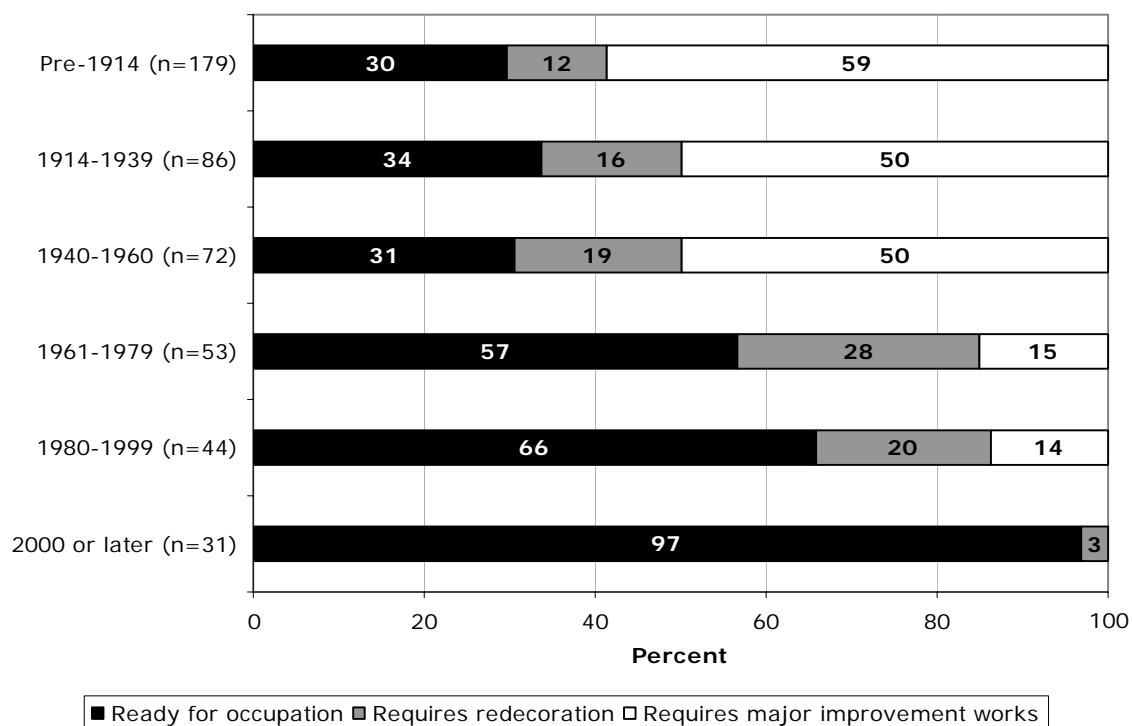


Figure 2.1.6: General condition of property (Q1.2f)

| | n | % |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Ready for occupation | 198 | 41 |
| Requires redecoration | 80 | 17 |
| Requires major improvement works | 200 | 42 |
| Total | 478 | 100 |

Figure 2.1.7: General condition of property by approximate age of property (Q1.2b and f)



Of the 494 respondents, 426 provided the postcode of their empty property. Using current DEFRA classifications¹ the postcodes were used to categorise each empty property as being situated in an urban, suburban or rural area². Figure 2.1.8 shows that just under two-thirds of those who provided a postcode owned a property in an urban area while 15% were in a suburban area and 22%, rural.

Figure 2.1.8: Type of area in which empty property is situated (derived from postcode, Q1.2c)

| | n | % |
|----------|-----|-----|
| Urban | 272 | 64 |
| Suburban | 62 | 15 |
| Rural | 92 | 22 |
| Total | 426 | 100 |

2.2: Responsibility for the property

The majority of respondents (88%) indicated that they were the property owner, while the remainder who answered this question said that they were not the current owner but were responsible for the property (Figure 2.2.1).

Figure 2.2.1: Responsibility for the property (Q1.1)

| | n | % |
|--|-----|-----|
| I am the owner and responsible for the property | 413 | 88 |
| I am not the owner but I am currently responsible for the property | 57 | 12 |
| Total | 470 | 100 |

When asked how they first came to be responsible for the property, almost one-third of owners said they had bought it to live in themselves and 18% had inherited it (Figure 2.2.2).

¹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/nrudp.asp>

² Analysis by postcode conducted by Bob Line, B.Line Housing Information

Figure 2.2.2: Method by which respondent first came to be responsible for property (Q1.3)

| | n | % |
|--|-----|-----|
| I bought it to live in myself | 156 | 32 |
| I inherited it | 87 | 18 |
| I bought it as an investment, with the intention of letting | 82 | 17 |
| I bought it as an investment, but not with the intention of letting it out | 44 | 9 |
| I manage it for someone else, including as an executor / agent | 25 | 5 |
| I built it | 17 | 3 |
| I bought it for family / friends to live in | 16 | 3 |
| I bought it as one of a group of properties | 10 | 2 |
| Other | 50 | 10 |
| Total | 486 | 100 |

One in ten respondents ticked 'other' as the way in which they came to be responsible for the property, the following list summarises the main methods specified (with the number of respondents who specified each in brackets):

- Acquired as part of a business (13)
- Tied accommodation (e.g. caretaker's premises) (6)
- Bought as part of another property or part of land (6)
- Currently renting it (4)
- For change of use / redevelopment (3)
- To keep the property within the family (3)
- Trustee (3)
- For holiday home / lets (2)
- To facilitate development of / access to adjacent land or property (2)
- As a second home (2)
- Personal reasons (2)
- Part exchange (1)
- Retirement home (1)

2.3: Plans for the property

Figure 2.3.1 shows that respondents' plans for their property in one year's time were most likely to involve selling the property on the open market (38%) or letting it to tenants (21%). Given that 32% of respondents had indicated that they had initially acquired the property to live in themselves (see Figure 2.2.2), the proportion of all respondents who anticipate they will be living in the property in a year's time is relatively low at 19%, in fact, of those respondents who said they purchased the property to live in, less than half (44%) indicated that they would be living in it in a year's time; 32% of this subset anticipated that they will have sold or be selling the property instead. Similarly, of those who said they had purchased the property with the intention of letting it to tenants, 58% thought the property would be let in one year, of

those who bought it as an investment but not with the intention of letting it, 72% indicated that it would be sold or for sale in a year and among those who bought their property for family or friends to live in, 31% thought this would be the case in a year's time.

Figure 2.3.1: Anticipated situation of the property in one year's time (Q1.4)

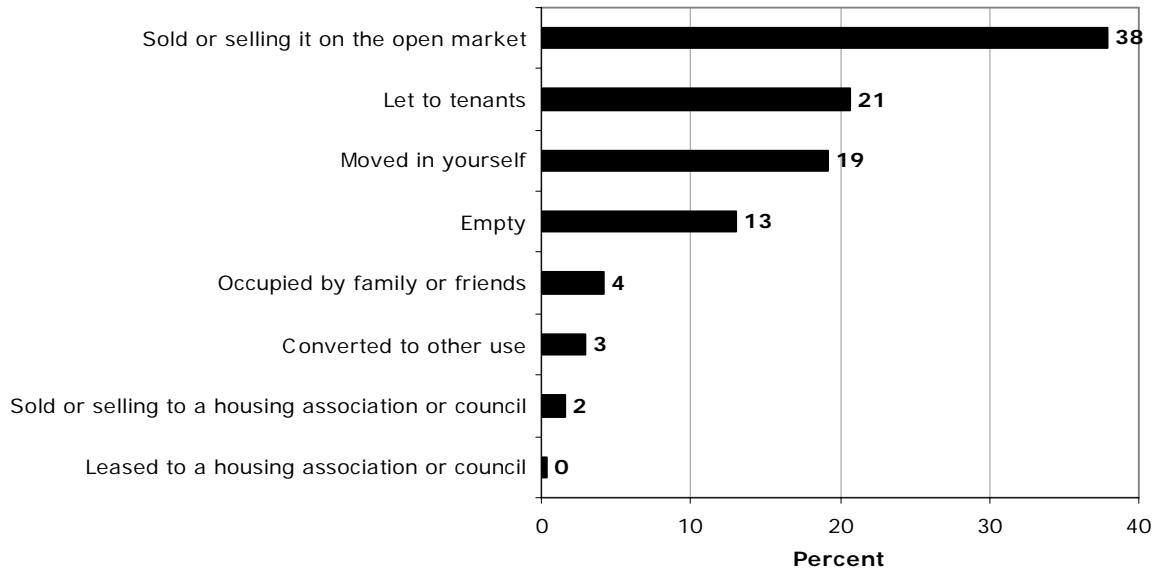


Figure 2.3.2 shows how respondents originally acquired their property (Q1.3) for just those respondents who anticipate the property will still be empty in a year's time. It is evident that 28% of those who believe the house will still be empty had originally intended to live in it themselves and 23% had inherited it; this could be due to a variety of factors, including the length of time taken to renovate or improve properties. The relatively low proportion of those whose property would still be empty who had acquired it as a investment is to be expected given that the longer the house stands empty, the longer it takes to achieve any return on such investment.

Figure 2.3.2: How respondent first came to be responsible for property (Q1.3) – Those who anticipate the property will be empty in one year only (Q1.4)

| | n | % |
|--|----|-----|
| I bought it to live in myself | 17 | 28 |
| I inherited it | 14 | 23 |
| I manage it for someone else, including as an executor / agent | 4 | 7 |
| I bought it as an investment, with the intention of letting | 3 | 5 |
| I built it | 2 | 3 |
| I bought it as an investment, but not with the intention of letting it out | 2 | 3 |
| I bought it for family / friends to live in | 1 | 2 |
| Other | 17 | 28 |
| Total | 60 | 100 |

Respondents who anticipated their property would still be empty in a year's time were invited to provide brief reasons for this. The following list summarises the reasons given with the number of respondents specifying each in brackets, and shows that ongoing renovation and improvement, and the associated costs were a factor for many owners:

- Being renovated / improved (15)
- Difficulties financing renovations / improvements (7)
- Not habitable (5)
- Plan to move in at later date (e.g. on retirement) (5)
- Personal circumstances (4)
- Planning permission delays (4)
- Property will or may be demolished (4)
- Property is an annex to main property (3)
- Used for business purposes (3)
- Do not want property occupied (2)
- Undecided what to do with it (2)
- Difficulties selling (1)
- Legal delays (1)
- Occupied some of the time (1)
- Owner living abroad (1)

Among survey respondents who anticipate their property will still be empty in a year's time, just two property owners specified that the property would still be empty because they do not want it to be occupied. Of these one property was a terraced house purchased with the intention of allowing family or friends to live in and the other owner had purchased a pre-1914 flat with the intention of living in it themselves. On the basis of the evidence provided by this survey, there is little to suggest that 'buy to leave' is a widespread phenomenon. It should be considered, though, that those respondents who are purposefully leaving their property empty may not be willing to admit to this on a

questionnaire, or indeed, may have been less likely to complete the survey in the first place.

Almost half of respondents said they expected the property to be empty for less than six months, and just 2% thought it would remain unoccupied for a further two years (Figure 2.3.3). Just under a quarter said they did not know how much longer the property would remain empty.

Figure 2.3.3: Length of time property is likely to remain empty (Q1.6)

| | n | % |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Less than six months | 221 | 48 |
| Between six months and two years | 123 | 27 |
| More than two years | 8 | 2 |
| Don't know | 107 | 23 |
| Total | 459 | 100 |

Forty-two percent of respondents said the property was currently being actively marketed for sale or to let (Figure 2.3.4), and 63% indicated that their property was currently being improved or repaired (Figure 2.3.5). Eighty-six respondents answered 'no' to both parts of question 1.7, indicating that they were neither actively marketing the property nor improving or repairing it (and a further 47 did not answer either part of this question).

Figure 2.3.4: Whether property is currently being marketed for sale or to let (Q1.7a)

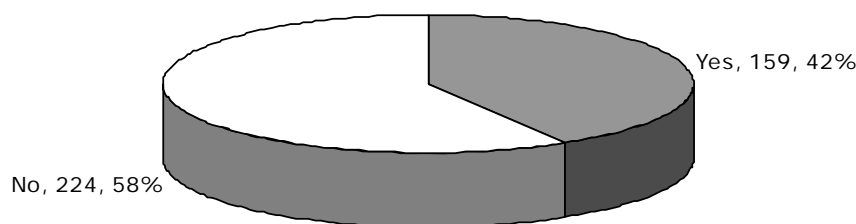
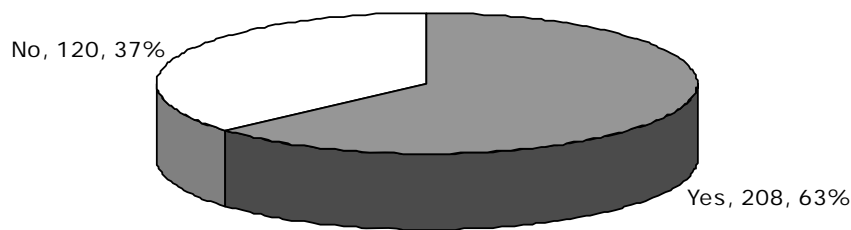


Figure 2.3.5: Whether property is currently being improved or repaired (Q1.7b)



When asked whether a variety of factors were preventing them from bringing the property back into occupation, 27% of respondents said this was because the property required major renovation work and approximately one in ten indicated that they did not want the property to be occupied (Figure 2.3.6).

Figure 2.3.6: Factors preventing the property from being occupied (Q1.9)

| | n | %* |
|--|-----|----|
| It requires major renovation | 131 | 27 |
| I do not want the property to be occupied | 54 | 11 |
| I am waiting for the right time to sell | 39 | 8 |
| Difficulty finding suitable tenants | 30 | 6 |
| It would cost me too much money | 21 | 4 |
| There are legal reasons why this is not possible | 19 | 4 |
| I want to use it as a second home or for a holiday let | 12 | 2 |
| I'm not sure how to go about it | 8 | 2 |
| Other | 153 | 31 |

*NB Percentages based on total number of respondents (494)

Among those who said they do not want the property to be occupied at present, 31% originally acquired the property with the intention of living in it themselves, and 27% inherited it. In addition, these respondents were less likely to be either marketing the property for sale or to let (23%) or to be improving or repairing the property (52%), than survey respondents overall.

Of those who indicated other factors were preventing the property from being occupied, the following reasons were specified (the number of respondents citing each appears in brackets):

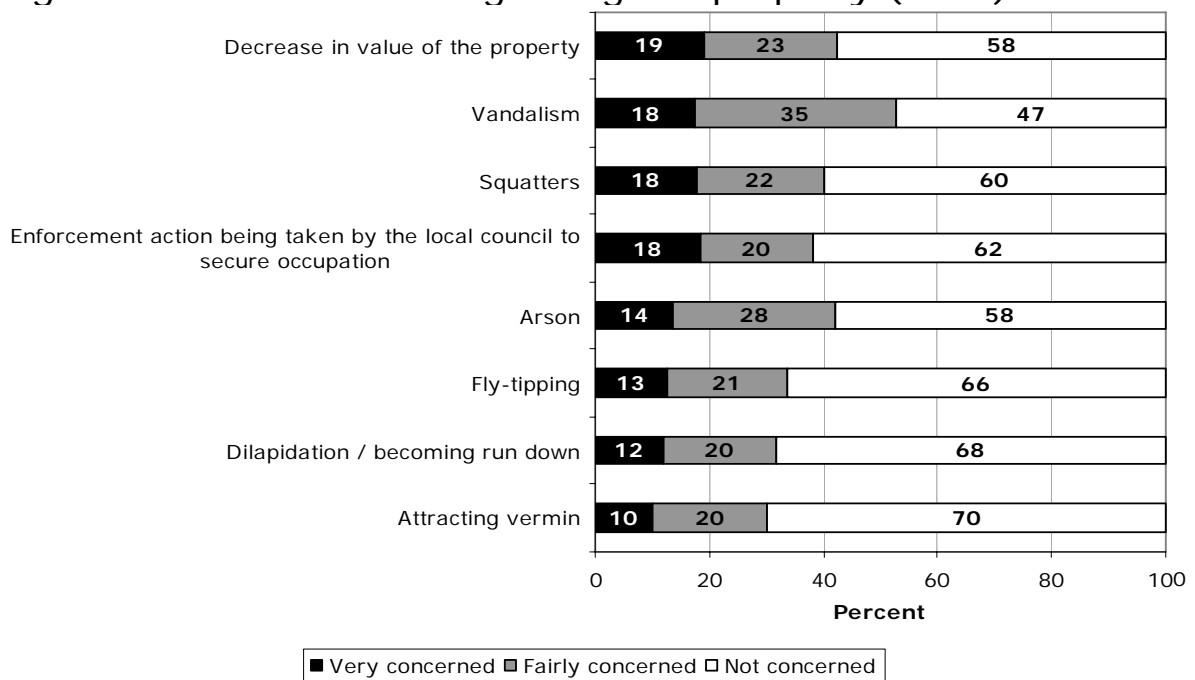
- Trying to sell, current market conditions, going through sale process (61)
- Completing renovations or refurbishment (26)

- Already occupied for some or all of the time (9)
- Planning permission or building regulations problems (9)
- Plan to occupy it myself in the medium term (7)
- Illness or caring for relative (4)
- Personal or family problems (4)
- Undergoing change of use (4)
- Difficulties finding trades people to work on property (3)
- It is an annex to main property (2)
- Awaiting staff - for tied accommodation (2)
- Used for business purposes (2)
- Flood damaged (2)
- Property restricted to 55+ or retired occupiers (2)
- Repossessed (2)
- Will be used following armed forces service (2)
- Awaiting decision on council grant for renovation (1)
- Do not have the time to work on property (1)
- Due to be demolished (1)
- Unwilling to let out (1)
- Using this property while another is renovated (1)
- Utilities not yet connected (1)
- Will be occupied by family shortly (1)

2.4: Concerns about the property and the neighbourhood

Respondents were presented with a list of potential issues with their property and the surrounding area and were asked to indicate how concerned they were about each one as a result of their property and/or other properties in the neighbourhood being empty. Figure 2.4.1 presents the responses to those issues that relate to the property itself, and indicates that a prime concern is a decrease in the property value, though it is difficult to gauge whether respondents are concerned about this as a result of the property being empty, or due to current housing market conditions more generally. Just over half of respondents were either 'very' or 'fairly' concerned about vandalism to the property and the possibility of enforcement action being taken by the local council was a major concern for 18%. Levels of concern over dilapidation were relatively low (12% 'very concerned'), this could be accounted for by the high proportion of respondents who had indicated in response to an earlier question that they were working on improving or renovating the property (see Figure 2.3.5).

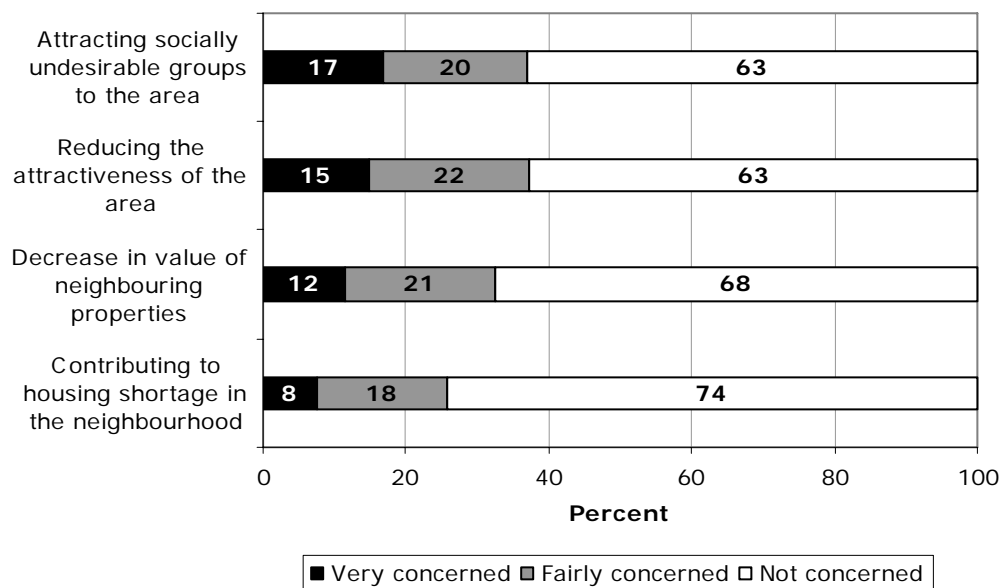
Figure 2.4.1: Concerns regarding the property (Q1.8)



(Minimum n = 369)

Figure 2.4.2 shows the level of concern expressed by respondents about issues that may affect the neighbourhood in which empty properties are located. Just over one-third were 'very' or 'fairly' concerned about empty properties attracting socially undesirable groups to the area and respondents were least likely to be worried about empty properties contributing to housing shortages in the neighbourhood.

Figure 2.4.2: Concerns regarding the local area (Q1.8)



(Minimum n = 381)

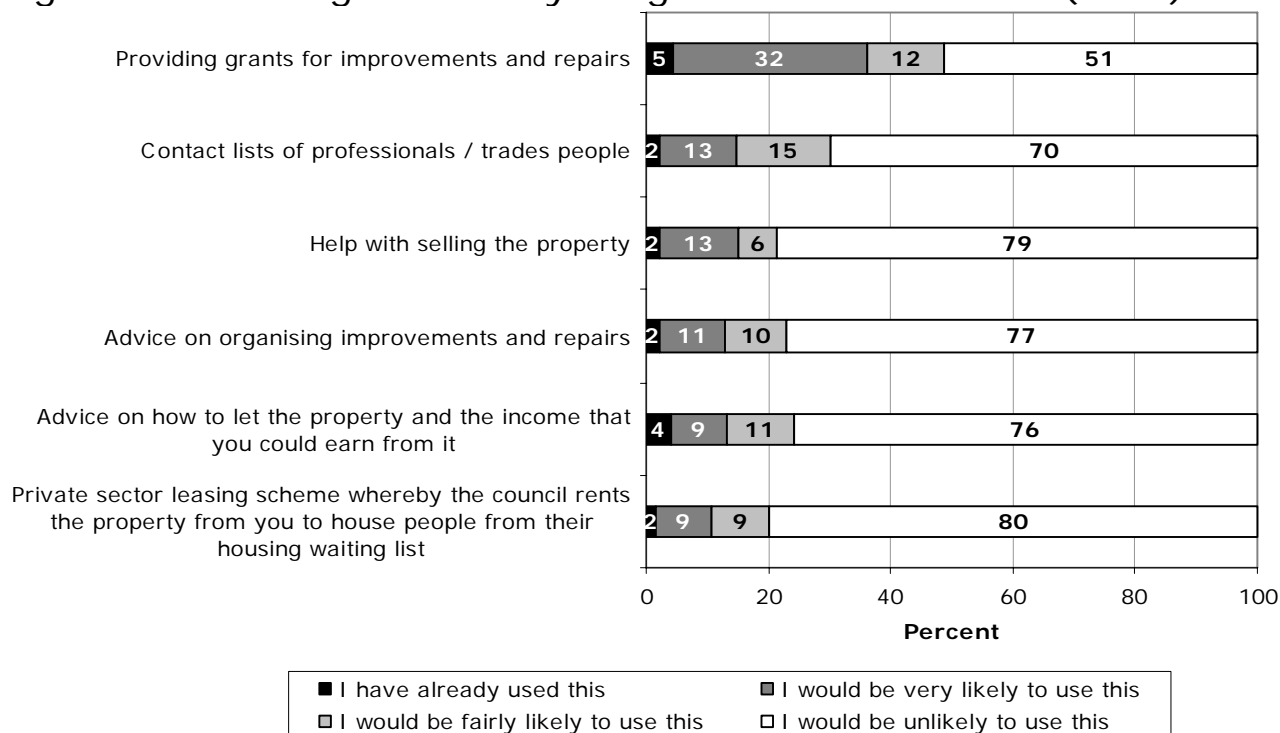
3: Empty properties and the local council

Section two of the questionnaire asked about property owners' usage and potential usage of council services and support aimed at bringing empty properties back into use, and about any contacts they may have had with the council about the property. There was also an opportunity to suggest improvements to the services offered to owners of unoccupied properties.

3.1: Usage and likely usage of council services

Only a small minority reported that they had already made use of the services and support their council may offer to help them bring their property back into occupation. The provision of grants for improvements and repairs emerged as both the service that the most respondents had already used, and the service that the greatest proportion of respondents (32%) said they would be 'very likely' to use (Figure 3.1.1). Respondents were also keen on councils providing details of professionals and trades people who could work on properties in need of improvement (28% were 'very' or 'fairly' likely to use this if it was offered) and they were least enthusiastic about utilising the private sector leasing scheme (80% were 'unlikely' to use this service).

Figure 3.1.1: Usage and likely usage of council services (Q2.1)



(Minimum n = 411)

In response to the opportunity in question 2.1 to specify any other service which they had used or would be likely to use, just four property owners provided suggestions, as follows:

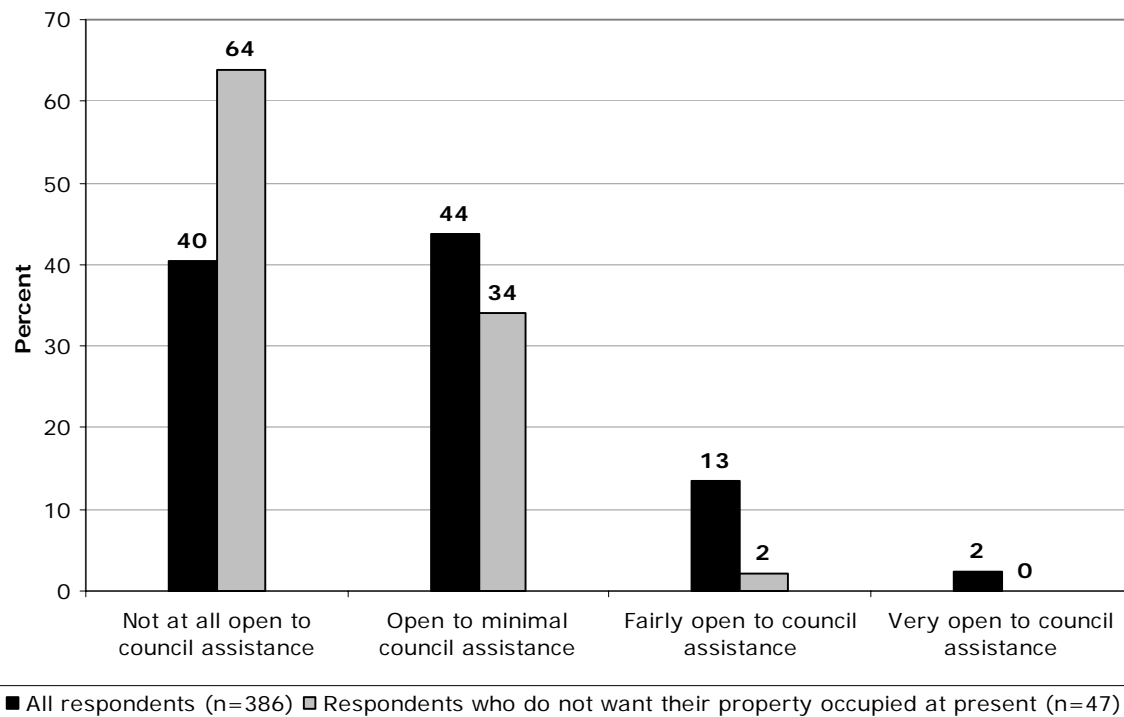
- Advice on holiday letting
- An efficient council planning department
- Council buy it
- Help with demolition and rebuild.

Question 2.1 was further analysed in an attempt to establish how open respondents might be to local council assistance, support or guidance in bringing their property back into occupation. Of the six possible schemes or types of support listed in question 2.1, a 'score' was calculated by awarding three points for each service respondents said they had already used, two for those they are very likely to use, one for the services they are fairly likely to use and zero for any they would not be likely to use. A total 'score' was then calculated for each respondent giving them the possibility of achieving a maximum of 18 points and a minimum of zero. These 'scores' were then banded to give a notion of the level of openness they exhibit towards these services and each respondent was categorised into one band as follows:

- Zero – *Not at all open to council assistance*
- 1-5 – *Open to minimal council assistance*
- 6-11 – *Fairly open to council assistance*
- 12+ – *Very open to council assistance*

Figure 3.1.2 shows that overall 44% of respondents are open to a minimal level of council assistance and 40% are certain that they require no support from their council. However, when compared to those said that they do not want their property to be occupied at present (in response to question 1.9) it is evident that these respondents are less likely to exhibit willingness to accept the suggested forms of council assistance: 64% said they would not be open to any of the local authority assistance suggested.

Figure 3.1.2: Openness to council assistance – all respondents compared to those who do not want their property occupied (Q2.1 & 1.9)



When the same measure of openness to council support is viewed according to whether the empty property is located in an urban, suburban or rural area, it can be seen that there is little difference between owners of properties in the different types of areas, though none of the owners of properties in suburban or rural areas were ‘very open’ to such support (Figure 3.1.3).

Figure 3.1.3: Openness to council assistance – by type of area in which the empty property is situated (Q2.1)

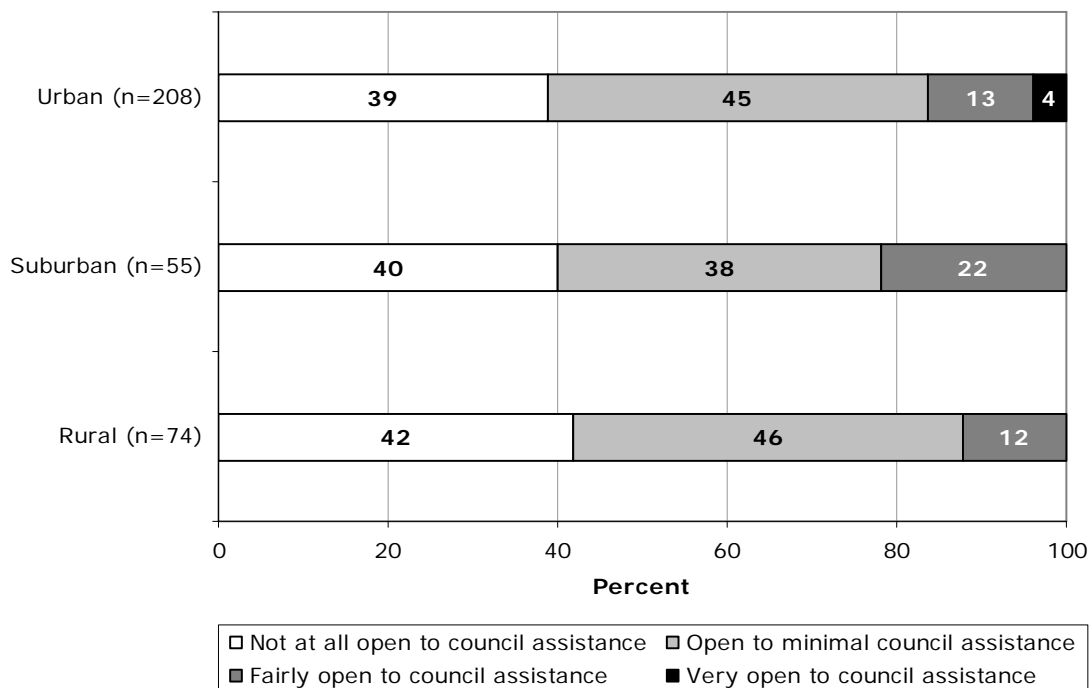
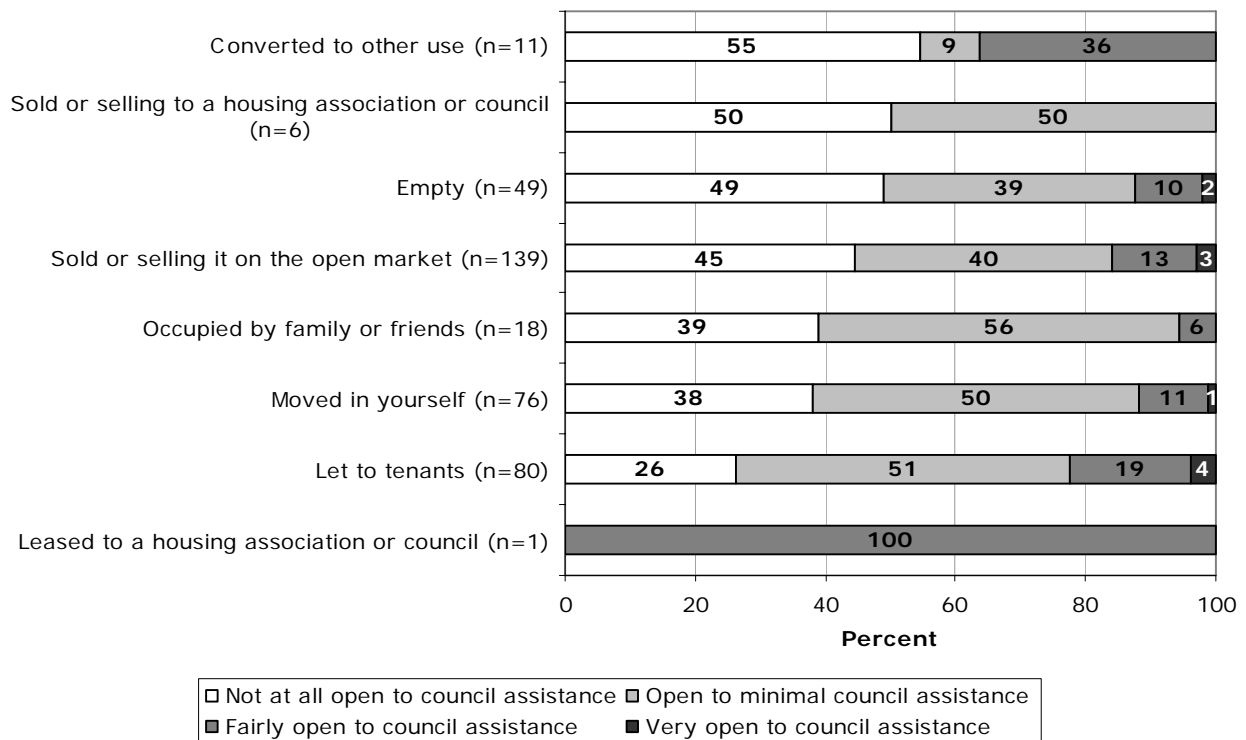


Figure 3.1.4 shows the same measure of openness to assistance according to the respondents' plans for their property in one year's time. Again, there is a great deal of variation within each category, though those who are planning to let to tenants seem the most open to using the specified council services.

Figure 3.1.4: Openness to council assistance – by anticipated situation of property in one year’s time (Q2.1 & 1.4)



When openness to assistance is presented just for those who expect their property to still be unoccupied in a year’s time (Figure 3.1.5) a similar picture of fairly widespread resistance to council support emerges as it had for those who do not want their property to be occupied at present (shown in Figure 3.1.2). Approximately half of these respondents would not be open to council assistance at all, one in ten would be ‘fairly open’ and just one respondent indicated they are ‘very open’ to such assistance.

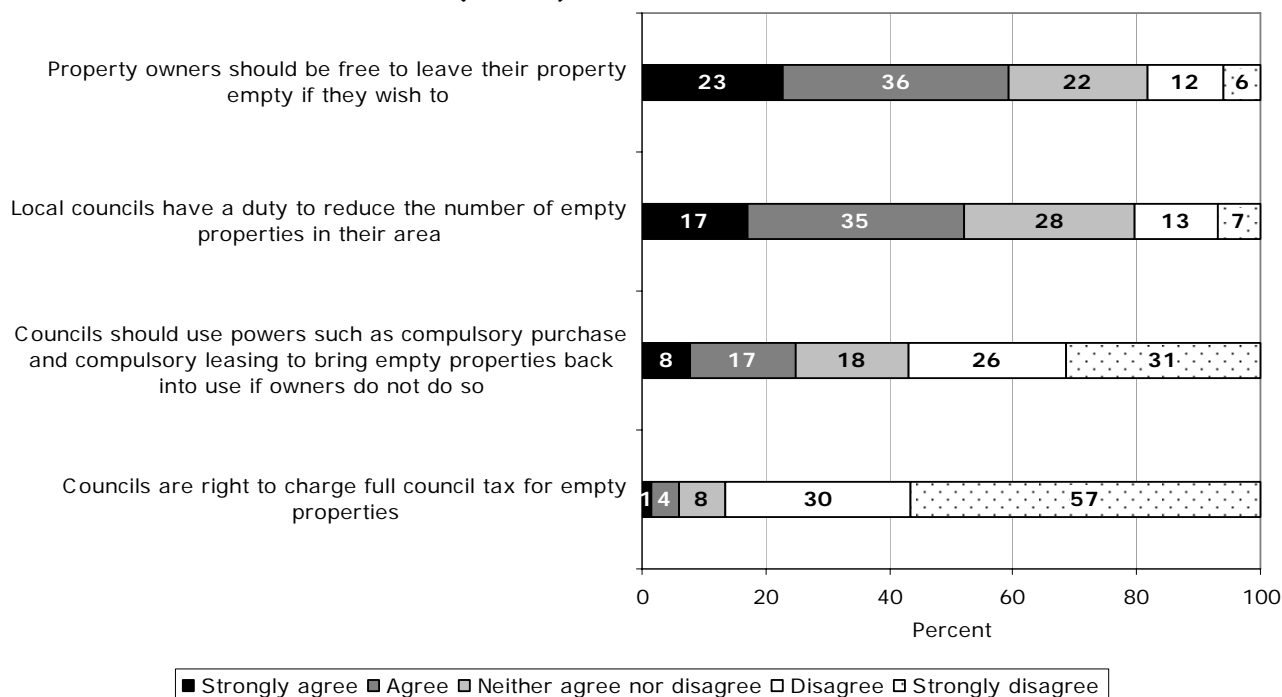
Figure 3.1.5: Openness to council assistance – those who anticipate their property will be empty in one year’s time only (Q2.1 & 1.4)

| | n | % |
|---------------------------------------|----|-----|
| Not at all open to council assistance | 24 | 49 |
| Open to minimal council assistance | 19 | 39 |
| Fairly open to council assistance | 5 | 10 |
| Very open to council assistance | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 49 | 100 |

3.2: The role of the local council

Respondents were asked to indicate how far they agree or disagree with four statements relating to the role of the local council in bringing empty properties back into use. Perhaps unsurprisingly, property owners were most likely to agree with the statement 'property owners should be free to leave their property empty if they wish to do so' (59% agreed or strongly agreed), though 18% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (Figure 3.2.1). Just over half of respondents agreed that 'local councils have a duty to reduce the number of empty properties in their area', though there were much higher levels of disagreement with statements relating to the entitlement of councils to use powers such as compulsory purchase and charging full council tax in order to achieve this.

Figure 3.2.1: Levels of agreement with statements about the role of the local council (Q2.2)



(Minimum n = 457)

The following list presents the main themes of the comments made in response to question 2.2 and the role of the local council in relation to empty properties, numbers in brackets indicate how many respondents mentioned each issue:

- Do not use services so no council tax should be charged (23)
- Each case should be treated individually as there are often good reasons for property being empty (18)
- Owners have the right to leave properties empty with no council interference (14)

- Council tax should not be charged on properties which are for sale or to let (11)
- Councils should allow a reasonable amount of time before taking action (10)
- Council tax charges are causing financial hardship or diverting funds from refurbishment of properties (10)
- Changes to planning process would help (7)
- Councils are right to charge full or partial council tax (6)
- Councils should do something about their own empty properties (5)
- Grants are not readily available (5)
- Council were unhelpful when approached for assistance (4)
- Against compulsory purchase or leasing schemes (3)
- Agree with councils trying to get properties occupied, but must allow for renovation etc (3)
- Council should provide support or advice, not penalties (3)
- Recognise that holiday lets are not detrimental to community (2)
- Council have been very helpful (2)
- Councils should do their bit to keep local areas clean (1)
- Councils should offer mortgages or assisted purchase (1)
- Feel victimised by council (1)

As the above list demonstrates, a salient feature of respondents' comments was that of being charged council tax on empty properties when owners do not see that they are making use of any of the services funded by council tax. There is perhaps a need for councils to inform empty property owners of exactly what their council tax contributions fund and raising awareness of those services which a property still benefits from even when it is empty. Many who commented on this issue focused narrowly on direct services such as refuse collection, though some recognised that empty properties benefit from some services (such as street lighting) and accepted that reduced rate council tax should be charged:

"It is people who use services provided by council tax. An unoccupied property is not using many of the services, so less money is needed to service them."

"I would like to know how I benefit from the charges to the council of circa £950 per annum when no service is provided by the council - why is 50% of this still chargeable on a vacant property on the market for sale?"

"Empty houses are not using rubbish facilities etc but the council does need fair revenue for their budget so 50% non-occupancy seems right (for say 1 year)."

"Full council tax should not be charged - not using local services such as education, libraries, social services. A reduced rate for police, street lighting would be appropriate."

Ten respondents pointed out that paying council tax on their empty properties was diverting funds away from renovations and refurbishment intended to help bring the property back into a habitable condition, and for some the charges were said to be contributing to financial difficulties:

"In my case charging full council tax would have the opposite effect as the extra money they take means it cannot be spent on the house and I have a small income as it is."

"The fact that I have just had to pay council tax (albeit at 50%) means that I no longer have the funds to continue renovation works. All works are now on hold!"

"The council would need to be careful about causing real hardship to people who can't afford to maintain their property."

Several commentators expressed the view that if the property was being actively marketed for sale or to let, councils should not have the right to charge council tax:

"The only reason this property is not sold is due to 'market conditions'. It is unfair to charge the owner full council tax when they are trying to sell and the problems are caused by conditions beyond our control."

"I agree that full council tax should be paid on houses that are empty and not for sale. But I do not agree with my greedy council charging me 90% tax on an empty house that is for sale, using two agents and with two large price reductions."

There were also a number of calls for councils to allow owners a reasonable amount of time to bring their property back into occupation before imposing charges or taking enforcement action and one owner described the perceived unfairness of any exemption periods not being re-started once there is a change of ownership:

"I don't think properties should remain empty in the long term but owners should be allowed sufficient time to consider their options, carry out improvements (including finding the money to do so) and then attempt to implement their chosen option - occupy, sell or let."

"I think the main question here is a time based one, obviously property owners need time to decide what to do with empty properties, however responsibility for interim upkeep should be enforceable by the local council and reasonable end dates for disposal / reoccupation need to be agreed and enforced."

"Bought this property and received the keys January 08. Understanding this property had been empty for six months before from previous owners. After contacting council regarding council tax payments I was not happy as I was getting two months discount being as the property had already been empty for 6 months."

Eighteen respondents commented that councils should assess each case individually rather than impose 'blanket' policies without accounting for individual circumstances:

"I generally agree that empty properties should be put to good use but I think each case should be looked at individually (as to why empty and problems caused) and caution needed for governing the rule - strict guidelines for councils."

"Your question, like those in recent council surveys, does not take into account the current state of the property in question. If a property is habitable and unused then yes the council should use its powers to ensure it is utilised."

Seven respondents reiterated comments made elsewhere in the survey about changes to planning permission procedures which could alleviate some of the issues surrounding long-term empty properties, and there were five complaints about grants for improving the properties not being readily available:

"The property is listed and it has taken 2 years to sort out planning and building regulations."

"It is the idiots at the Planning Dept that have caused me to leave the house empty. They should concentrate on issues that matter to the general population rather than picking on individuals trying to improve the area."

"I have tried for 8 years to gain help from my local council (via a grant) each year I receive a letter telling me the budget has been allocated!"

"I wish to complete my house and live in it. For the past 5 years I've been paying council tax and have not heard anything from applications for grants."

Fourteen owners stated that they believe they have the right to leave their property empty if they wish to, and a further five expressed dissatisfaction at the council's intervention when the local authorities themselves own properties which are unoccupied:

"Providing house is well kept and looked after it's none of the council's business what the owner does with it."

"The situation is not as black and white as the questions. Of course empty properties can lead to deterioration of an area and are largely undesirable and of course it would be better for them to be occupied by people needing homes. However as the owner I have bought the property with my hard earned money and provided I don't allow the property to detrimentally affect the neighbourhood I should be free to do what I want with that property. There are many occupied properties in poor condition too."

"This is my property and I would like it to be left alone to do with it as I want."

"Councils should concentrate on quickly filling their own vacant properties. Vacated council houses / flats around here are frequently left empty for up to 3 months (and sometimes more)."

"The council owns sub-standard and boarded up properties in this area. They should concentrate their efforts on these. I am renovating my own to exceptionally high standards, theirs don't come close."

3.3: Contact with the local council

Just under two-thirds of respondents said they had made contact with their local council about the fact that their property is empty (Figure 3.3.1).

Figure 3.3.1: Whether respondents have made contact with their local council regarding the empty property (Q2.3)

| | n | % |
|-------|-----|-----|
| Yes | 298 | 62 |
| No | 184 | 38 |
| Total | 482 | 100 |

Those who said they had not contacted their local council were asked why this is, and as Figure 3.3.2 shows, more than half said that this was because they do not need assistance while 29% were unaware that the council could offer assistance. The majority of those who ticked 'other' reasons for not contacting the council specified that this was because the property is currently for sale.

Figure 3.3.2: Reasons for not contacting the local council (Q2.4)

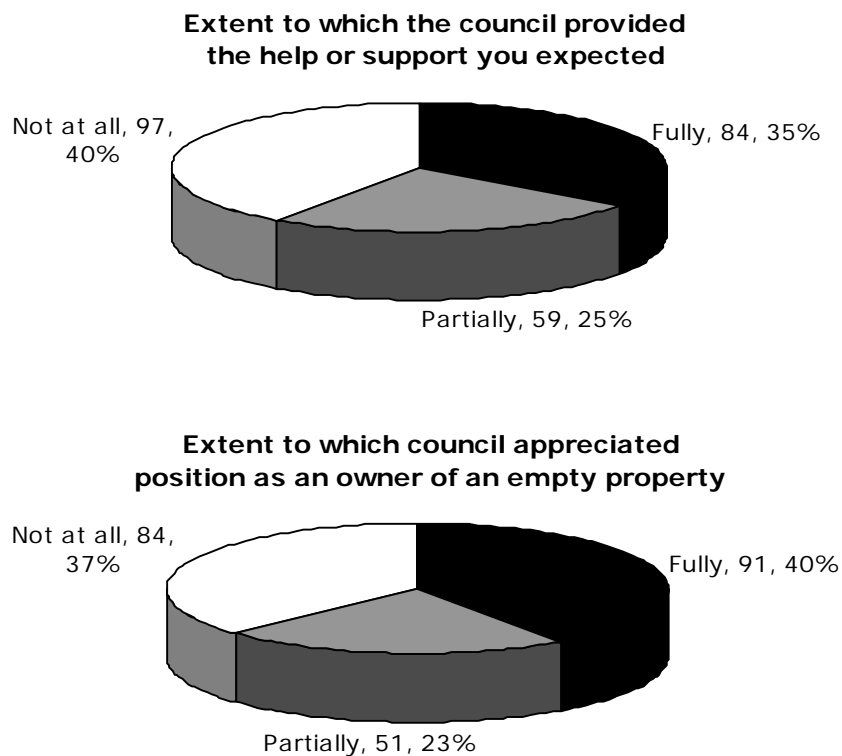
| | n | % |
|---|-----|-----|
| I do not need assistance | 91 | 54 |
| I did not know the local council could help | 49 | 29 |
| I do not want to bring the property back into use | 10 | 6 |
| The assistance available does not meet my needs | 7 | 4 |
| Other | 10 | 6 |
| Total | 167 | 100 |

Those who had made contact with the council about their property were asked to indicate how recent that contact was (Figure 3.3.3), and the extent to which the council provided the help and support they expected and appreciated their position as an empty property owner (Figure 3.3.4). The majority of those who had contacted their council had done so within the last year (81%). Respondents' evaluations of their most recent contact were mixed: 40% said the council had not provided the help and support they expected, though 35% indicated that they were entirely satisfied with this aspect of their contact. Similarly, 40% of those who had contacted the council said that the council fully appreciated their position as an empty property owner, but a further 37% felt this was not the case. When respondents' evaluations of their dealings with the council were viewed according to how recent that contact was made, there was little difference in the ratings provided by those who had made very recent contact, compared to those who had done so more than a year ago. It should be noted however, that respondents' perceptions of their contact can be influenced by the outcome, for example, if contact was made in order to apply for a grant and the grant was not awarded, this may adversely affect the property owner's views of both the help and support offered, and the extent to which they felt the council understood their position.

Figure 3.3.3: Timing of most recent contact with local council (Q2.5a)

| | n | % |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|
| Within the last year | 230 | 81 |
| 1-3 years ago | 51 | 18 |
| More than 3 years ago | 4 | 1 |
| Total | 285 | 100 |

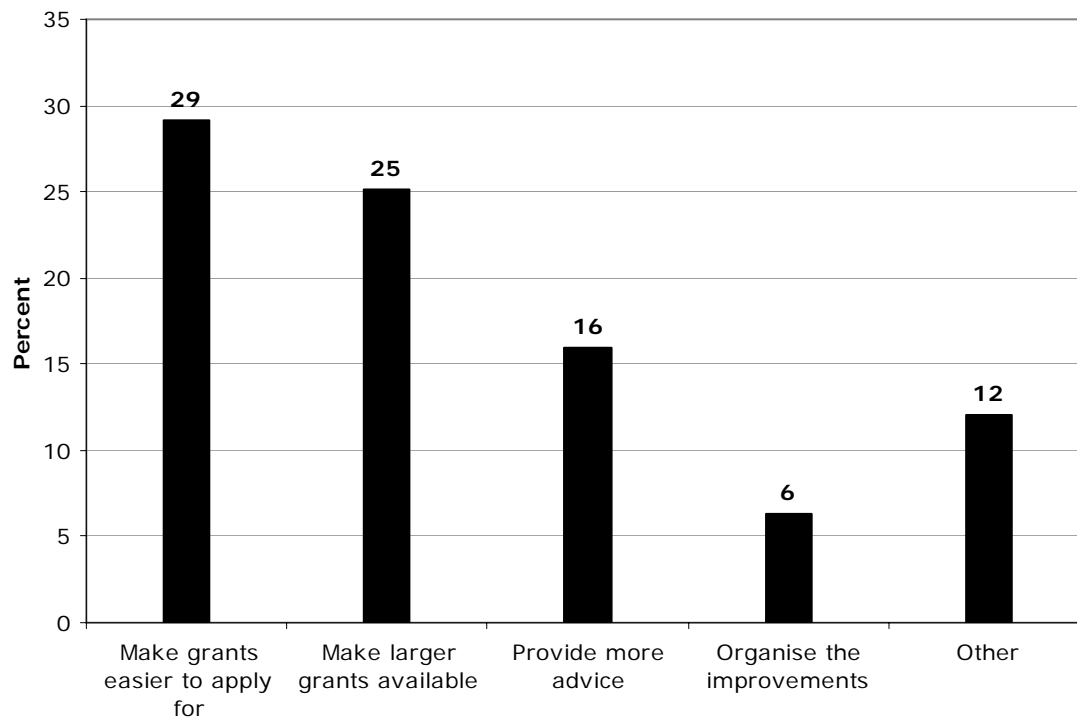
Figure 3.3.4: Respondents' evaluations of their most recent contact with the local council (Q2.5b)



3.4: What more can councils do to assist empty property owners?

Figure 3.4.1 illustrates that of the possible changes to local council services and support to help owners of unoccupied properties bring them back into use, those relating to the availability of grants were the most frequently requested. Just under a third of respondents were keen to see the application process made easier and 25% would like larger grants to be available.

Figure 3.4.1: Changes to local council services requested (Q2.6) *



* Percentages based on total number of respondents (494)

Of those who ticked 'other' in response to question 2.6, the most frequently suggested change was improvements to the system of obtaining planning permission; comments on this topic related to the speed of decision making, an easing of some of the restrictions and regulations and more transparency in the decision making process. Eleven property owners would like to see a broadening of the availability of grants for improvement work, this included a widening of the eligibility criteria to include people in different circumstances and to include projects for a variety of purposes. The following summarises the main issues raised by those who ticked 'other' in response to which changes they would like to see, figures in brackets indicate how many respondents mentioned each topic:

- Improve planning permission system or relax regulations (14)
- Make grants more widely available (11)
- Reduce or zero rate council tax on empty properties (5)
- Assist in finding or dealing with tenants (4)
- Housing market needs to improve (3)
- Nothing - leave owners alone (3)
- Assist disabled people or carers of disabled people (2)
- Assist in selling properties (2)
- Be more understanding of property owners' situation (2)
- Council buy the property (2)
- Improvements to highways in surrounding area (2)

- Keep neighbouring properties and streets clean and tidy (2)
- Make owners aware of available help (2)
- Coordinated housing waiting list (1)
- Council should deal with own problems first (1)
- Offer council mortgages (1)
- Offer guidance or surveys on condition of property (1)
- Provide advice on coordinating utilities and services to property (1)
- Provide a free house clearance service (1)
- Provide lists of recommended trades people (1)

The final question invited property owners to make any suggestions for improvements to the support provided by local councils. While many of the comments echoed those made in response to question 2.6 (listed above), there were some other suggestions which had not previously been made. The most frequently recurring comment was that more should be done to raise awareness of the services and support the council offers, many of the 23 respondents who mentioned this said that this should be done at the point at which an empty property owner first contacts the council (for many this is when they contact the council tax office):

"Advertise - make it known you are there for advice and assistance in various ways (contact numbers)."

"They can contact home owners and explain options available to them to use the house, for both to benefit."

"A simple letter explaining what services etc are available would be a benefit. Send to all new owners (just in case) and to the owners of all houses known to be vacant."

"Making owners aware of all the assistance / options available to them when advising the council that the property is empty."

"When applying for reduced council tax, send out information on available assistance."

Once again the issue of broadening the eligibility criteria for grants towards improvement work was raised:

"There is not much help the council want to offer to private renovators when you seek grants or assistance due to constantly being told that we do not meet criteria."

"The council have been extremely negative - they offer no help to working people who seek to improve property, but seem to want to help those who can't be bothered to help themselves."

"Grants open to all rather than favouring one section of society over another."

Some commentators remarked on the delays caused by the length of time for decisions to be made on the award of grants while others were keen for substantial grants to be awarded for environmentally-friendly renovations:

"While waiting for a grant the property was vandalised and [I was] then told there was no grant available."

"Original intention was to make the property a zero carbon one. A lot of money and an incompetent architect later I gave up and just rented the thing out. Grants for eco-makeover are derisory - far less than VAT payable!"

Sixteen respondents called for councils to be more flexible in their approach to empty property owners and to take more account of individual circumstances when contacting owners and deciding on an appropriate course of action:

"Listen to owners! I have explained many times that I will move in as soon as the property I lease has sold. But I still get questioned about why it is empty!"

"To be more understanding of individual cases and be more approachable - less blinkered by 'red tape' which ultimately doesn't help the community."

"I feel that in a situation such as mine (mother went into dementia care home in May 2007 - subsequently died in December 2007) there should be a more sensitive approach. I received paperwork only a month or so after her death asking what were my plans for the property."

There were also a couple of requests for better coordination of contacts with empty property owners within the council; one requesting better communication between departments involved, and another which suggested empty property enquiries should be dealt with in a more cohesive manner:

"The housing dept (v. helpful) do not realise the planning dept are refusing all attempts to demolish / rebuild this property."

"The need for a satisfactory and ownership-led traceable enquiry route - i.e. be able to speak to one council agent who is solely responsible for dealing with and seeing your enquiry through to a satisfactory conclusion."

Several owners expressed the view that councils should place a greater emphasis on providing help and advice in the first instance and to resort to more punitive measures only as a last resort. There was a perception among some that they were being harassed and threatened by their council without being offered the support they require to get the property occupied:

"[The council] are not helpful, we are first time buyers and need all the help we can get and they have provided us more worry/stress and expense instead of the support we need."

"I feel that the tone of correspondence used by councils with regards to empty properties implies that owning an empty property is a moral inequity and should be more understanding and supportive with the terminology used."

"The only contact from the local council has been about threatening to use compulsory purchase - they have discharged what appears to be a minimal responsibility on behalf of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. A face to face meeting, personal touch."

"Provide help rather than hindrance."

Eight respondents requested an extended time period of reduced or zero rated council tax, and a further four argued that council tax should not be payable at all on unoccupied properties:

"Allow owners with genuine reasons to over-run the 12 month exemption from council tax, whilst renovations are planned to avoid rushing work and short cut costs to meet existing rules."

"Giving empty council tax rates when renovation work can be seen to be being carried out. Because house was previously empty before I took it I was not eligible for free rates."

"Not charge council tax on houses which are empty and thus not using council services."

There were also requests for councils to be more lenient with owners who are actively marketing their property for sale or to let:

"More consideration should be given to people who are actively trying to sell empty properties by not charging council tax."

"Stop charging rates on houses that are for sale or to let."

Concerns about delays caused by the planning permission process were also voiced; six commentators suggested the process should be simplified and streamlined while a further two requested more clarity in planning regulations:

"In regards to planning permission, the system needs to speed up. I have found this process is very slow with very little urgency towards applicants."

"Planning rules / legislation is not easy to understand and changes frequently. An easy to understand document for those wishing to apply for planning permission could be of use."

Six respondents suggested councils could provide more comprehensive support and assistance to landlords in terms of both finding new tenants and dealing with existing ones:

"Help with letting to decent tenants if the owners want help."

"Seminar for new landlords to help with letting / good landlord's practice / insurance and working with local council to address housing shortage."

"I think that support to me from the council to find a replacement tenant would have been quite useful/helpful."

Four property owners expressed the view that they should be left to do as they wish with their property without intervention from the council and three said that they neither needed nor expected the council to assist them:

"Providing the empty property is kept tidy and maintained, the council should not interfere with private owners."

"Please leave me alone as I am doing all I can to refurbish this property to live in."

"Do not really expect / wish any support from local council."

"The council do not have any input to the property because it is privately owned."

There were two responses which praised the level of support they had received from their local council:

“DDDC (Derbyshire Dales District Council) are excellent. No improvement required.”

“Generally very satisfied with the service provided, and the professionalism of the officers providing it. Well done North Kesteven District Council.”

The following list summarises the main themes of the comments made on suggested improvements to local council services for owners of unoccupied properties (the figure in brackets denotes the number of respondents who mentioned each topic):

- Raise awareness of help available (23)
- Offer wider availability of grants (19)
- Treat each case individually and listen to owners’ circumstances (16)
- Provide help and advice rather than harassing owners (8)
- Extend period of reduced or zero rated council tax (7)
- Help landlords deal with tenants and associated problems (6)
- Simplify or speed up planning permission process / clarify regulations (8)
- Make allowances for those who are actively trying to sell or let property, e.g. charge reduced or no council tax (5)
- Do not charge council tax on empty properties at all (4)
- Help to organise improvements (4)
- Leave owners to do what they wish with their property (4)
- Councils to help sell or let properties (3)
- Do not expect or need support from council (3)
- Offer financial services such as council mortgages for prospective buyers or special rate loans for refurbishment (3)
- Council buy the property (2)
- Happy with service provided (2)
- More consistency and coherence in dealings with council e.g. one contact name (2)
- Provide lists of recommended trades people (2)
- Too quick to penalise empty property owners (2)
- Apply restrictions to student lets (1)
- Council slow to respond to requests for help and suggestions for occupying property (1)
- Do more to improve local area (1)
- Keep council records up to date as to whether property is empty or not (1)

Appendix 1: The questionnaire

A copy of the questionnaire follows, or the survey can be accessed online at:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/survey-unit/propertyas>



East Midlands Empty Property Survey 2008

Please complete this survey as fully as possible thinking about the property specified in the covering letter. Your responses will be treated in confidence and will be used to help improve the services and advice offered to property owners by local councils.

Please return the completed questionnaire using the Freepost envelope provided (no stamp required) to: Survey Unit, University of Nottingham, University Park, FREEPOST NG6687, Nottingham, NG7 1BR, by 26th March 2008.

Section 1: About the property

1.1 Are you the owner / responsible for the property specified in the covering letter?

- Yes, I am the owner and responsible for the property
- I am not the owner but I am currently responsible for the property

1.2 a) What type of property is it?

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Detached house | <input type="checkbox"/> Bungalow | } | <input type="checkbox"/> In a purpose-built block in the city centre |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Semi detached house | <input type="checkbox"/> Flat - If a flat, is this...? | | <input type="checkbox"/> In a purpose-built block outside the city centre |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Terraced house | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Other type of flat (eg in a converted house) |

b) When was the property built?

If you do not know the year of construction, please indicate roughly when it was built:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-1914 | <input type="checkbox"/> 1940-1960 | <input type="checkbox"/> 1980-1999 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1914-1939 | <input type="checkbox"/> 1961-1979 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2000 or later |

c) What is the full postcode of the property?

d) How many bedrooms does it have?

e) If the property is a flat, how many floors does the whole building have?

f) How would you describe the property's general condition?

- Ready for occupation
- Requires redecoration
- Requires major improvement works

1.3 Which one of the following best describes how you first came to be responsible for this property?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I inherited it | <input type="checkbox"/> I bought it to live in myself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I built it | <input type="checkbox"/> I bought it as an investment, but not with the intention of letting it out |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I bought it as an investment, with the intention of letting it out | <input type="checkbox"/> I bought it for family / friends to live in |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I bought it as one of a group of properties | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) |

I manage it for someone else, including as an executor / agent

1.4 What do you anticipate the situation of this empty property will be in one year's time?

*[Please tick the **one** most likely option only]*

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moved in yourself | <input type="checkbox"/> Sold or selling to a housing association or council |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Let to tenants | <input type="checkbox"/> Occupied by family or friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leased to a housing association or council | <input type="checkbox"/> Converted to other use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sold or selling it on the open market | <input type="checkbox"/> Empty <i>[please go to question 1.5]</i> |

1.5 If you expect the property to be empty, please give brief reasons:

1.6 How much longer do you think the property will be empty for?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than six months | <input type="checkbox"/> More than two years |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Between six months and two years | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know |

- 1.7 Is the property... a) currently being actively marketed for sale or to let?** Yes No
- b) currently being improved / repaired?** Yes No

1.8 How concerned are you about the following as a result of this property and other properties in the neighbourhood being empty?

| | Very concerned | Fairly concerned | Not concerned | Don't know / Not applicable |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Regarding the property: | | | | |
| Vandalism | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Squatters | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Dilapidation / becoming run down | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Arson | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fly-tipping | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Attracting vermin | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Decrease in value of my property | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Enforcement action being taken by the local council to secure occupation | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Regarding the local area: | | | | |
| Attracting socially undesirable groups to the area | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reducing the attractiveness of the area | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Decrease in value of neighbouring properties | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Contributing to housing shortage in the neighbourhood | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

1.9 If you would like the property to be occupied, are any of the following preventing you from doing so? [Please tick all that apply]

- I do not want the property to be occupied [please go to Section 2]
- I'm not sure how to go about it It requires major renovation
- It would cost me too much money Difficulty finding suitable tenants
- There are legal reasons why this is not possible I am waiting for the right time to sell
- I want to use it as a second home or for a holiday let
- Other (please specify)

Section 2: Empty properties and your local council

2.1 Some local councils provide the following services / schemes to help owners bring properties back into occupation. Please indicate whether you have already used, or how likely you would be to use each one:

| | I have already used this | I would be very likely to use this | I would be fairly likely to use this | I would be unlikely to use this |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Advice on how to let the property and the income that you could earn from it | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Private sector leasing scheme whereby the council rents the property from you to house people from their housing waiting list | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Contact lists of professionals / trades people | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Help with selling the property | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Advice on organising improvements and repairs | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Providing grants for improvements and repairs | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other (please specify) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="text"/> | | | | |

2.2 How far do you agree with the following statements about empty properties and the role of the local council:

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Local councils have a duty to reduce the number of empty properties in their area | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Councils should use powers such as compulsory purchase and compulsory leasing to bring empty properties back into use if owners do not do so | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Property owners should be free to leave their property empty if they wish to | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Councils are right to charge full council tax for empty properties | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If you would like to comment on any of your responses to question 2.2, please use the space below:

2.3 Have you ever been in contact with your local council about the fact that the property is empty?

Yes [please go to question 2.5] No [please go to question 2.4]

2.4 If no, is this because... [please tick **one** main reason only]

I do not want to bring the property back into use I did not know the local council could help
 I do not need assistance The assistance available does not meet my needs

Other (please specify)

[Please go to question 2.6]

2.5 a) If yes, when was your most recent contact?

Within the last year 1-3 years ago More than 3 years ago

b) In relation to your most recent contact...

| | Fully | Partially | Not at all | Don't know / can't say |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| To what extent did the council provide the help or support you expected? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To what extent do you feel that the council appreciated your position as an owner of an empty property? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2.6 Which of the following changes, including new incentives or assistance from your local council, would enable you to bring the property back into use? [Please tick all that apply]

Make larger grants available Make grants easier to apply for

Provide more advice Organise the improvements

Other (please specify)

2.7 Please use the space below to suggest any improvements to the support local councils provide for owners of empty properties:

If you would like to be entered into the prize draw for one of two prizes of £200 in High Street Vouchers, please provide contact details below (these details will not be linked to the answers you have given in the survey):

Name: _____ Telephone: _____

Address: _____

Thank you very much for completing this survey, please return it to the University of Nottingham Survey Unit in the Freepost envelope provided

If you have any queries about this survey, please contact the University of Nottingham Survey Unit by email: survey-unit@nottingham.ac.uk or by telephone: 0115 951 5188